

History of Livingston Square Park

By: Dale C. Maley
For: Fairburynews.net
Date: May 26, 2025

Many residents and visitors like to see the colorful and beautiful flowers in Fairbury's smallest park at the Locust and First Streets intersection. For the past several years, several volunteers, including Karen Munz and SELCAS members, have planted and cared for these beautiful flowers in this park.

For such a small park, Livingston Square is steeped in local Fairbury history. Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border. John and his son Henry Marsh came to Fairbury when the town was founded. They dug and found coal about one mile west of Fairbury along Route 24. This discovery of coal set off a coal mining boom in Central Illinois. John and Henry Marsh added the Marsh Addition to Fairbury on the west side of town. They donated one square block for Marsh Park. They also set up a block by the current water tower called Livingston Square or the Arcade Block. Their plan was for businesses to congregate around this block's west end of town. A local feud developed to see whether the city would primarily develop on the West End or the East End of town. This feud resulted in many business buildings being burned down in Fairbury in the 1870s and 1880s. The feud finally ended, and most of the businesses in Fairbury were located east of First Street.

The area northwest of the First and Locust Streets intersection has served several functions over the years. It was the site of Fairbury's first hand-dug well for public drinking water and had the first wood water tower. Several deep wells were drilled and used on this site until they were relocated to south First Street just north of the Indian Creek bridge.

Fairbury's first fire engine was housed in the first story of the old City Hall. It was later moved to an old shed along First Street.

The Downtown Revitalization Committee was formed in April 1995. Other groups helping to improve the downtown were the City of Fairbury Park Committee and the Fairbury Association of Commerce. One of the key members of the Downtown Revitalization Committee was Joan Steidinger (1933-2023). She was the wife of James Steidinger (1931-2022) of Steidinger Tire and ran a business called Bell Book & Candle.

Other members of the Revitalization Committee were John Tollensdorf Jr., who operated the Fairbury Paint Store just east of the Bluestem Bank, and John Bellot (1940-2024), who ran a drug store across the street from Veterans Memorial Park. Other members included Bob Nussbaum Sr. (1927-1996) and his son Bob Nussbaum, who operated Bob Nussbaum Plumbing & Heating. Local attorneys Steve Weeks and Tom Brucker also helped in this effort.

The Revitalization Committee's goal was to spruce up the four-block stretch of Locust Street that formed the heart of the city's retail community. The combined efforts of the three groups resulted in several major accomplishments, including more than a dozen new decorative street lights, parking upgrades, wood planters with trees in them, and the resurfacing of Locust Street. The Future Farmers of America and the Boy Scouts also helped with this community effort.

Another goal was adding the 1892 old City Hall to the National Register of Historic Places. Jack Tollensdorf conducted the extensive research required to complete the application for the building's addition. Old City Hall was approved to be added to the National Registry of Historic Places in 1996. Jack Tollensdorf also did the research required to add the historic Beach House on Hickory Street to the National Register in 1996.

Plans were made to replace the concrete water fountain in Central Park (now Veteran's Memorial Park) with a new wood gazebo. Bluestem National Bank donated the funds required to purchase the new wood gazebo, which was installed on top of the old concrete fountain in the Fall of 1997.

Another goal was to transform a gravel parking lot northwest of the intersection of Locust and First Streets into Livingston Square Park. This goal was accomplished in 1997, and a plaque was placed in the park. The plaque recounts that the patron contributors for this project were Bluestem National Bank, the City of Fairbury, Elite Landscaping, Richard & Margo Phelps, Jim Steidinger, Joan Steidinger, Kathy Durham, Jerry Durham, Nancy Ifft, Alvin Shulman, Walt Kohlmann, and Ruth Teubel.

Service clubs and organizations that helped on this project included the Fairbury Lions Club, Slagel's Tree Space, Indian Creek Materials, Lioness Club, Garden Club, Fairview Haven, A Cut Above, Tri-County Citizens for Health, Livingston Lodge #290 I.O.O.F., Rebekah Charity Home #112, Helen Lewis Smith Pavilion, PCHS Ag Sciences Class of 1997, Daisy Troop #516, and Maurice Steidinger.

The plaque also notes that memorials were made for James Brown, Leroy Neiswander, and Gertrude Monroe Stephens.

In 1997, Fairbury attorney Tom Brucker applied to enter Fairbury in the state-wide competition for the Governor's Home Town Award. In June, Fairbury was notified that it had won the Governor's Cup top prize in the 1997 Governor's Home Town Award program.

After Livingston Square Park was created in 1997, several other changes were made adjacent to this small park. The Brian J. Munz Safety Complex, built just west of the park, houses SELCAS and the Fairbury Fire Department. This new facility was dedicated on July 31, 2015.

Although Livingston Square Park is Fairbury's smallest park, it is full of local history dating back to 1857, when the city was first created. Thanks to the efforts of several volunteers, many citizens and visitors enjoy the colorful flowers in this unique small park.



Karen Munz taking care of Fairbury's smallest park, the Livingston Square Park, at the northwest corner of First and Locust Streets.